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Re: Historic-Cultural Monument application for "Marco Place Court", #CHC-2025-1139-HCM

Dear Commissioners of the Cultural Heritage Commission (CHC) and Members of the Office of Historical Resources (OHR):

I have appeared before you several times and have always had a positive experience. I have the utmost respect for you and the work you do. I come out of the hearings acknowledging your work as exemplary, complete and well realized. My neighbors and I always enjoyed our presentations and have been treated with respect.

About me: I received a Masters in Library and Information Science (MLIS) from the UCLA School of Library and Information Science. I specialized in rare books (Special Collections). After graduating I worked from a grant from the Ahmanson Murphy Foundation to catalogue the Aldine Collection, of a 16th-century Venetian printing family. This turned into a catalogue published by the University of California. And I am not the only one in our group with academic credentials.

Our applications to your commission have always been well produced and the accompanying project presentations are also well written and thoughtfully presented. We are all volunteers doing this. One of the applications, we even undertook on the request of OHR. You have acknowledged our detailed research and writing on several occasions.

So, I was then caught by surprise by your rapid dismissal of our recent Historic-Cultural Monument presentation on the Marco Place Court in Venice. Neighbors and I spent over a year researching and writing it; we did not hire experts, preferring to do the work ourselves, realizing the cost professionals require. We feel that the work done supported our nomination.

I believe there were some troubling events that I believe led to your vote to deny. At the end I have placed a timeline of the City's actions. The main one is from the notice of accepting the project for consideration: A Certified letter to applicants and new owner/developer (Mr. Jeffrey Donovan) notifying of 3/20/25 CHC final hearing date.

Importantly the notice states: “You are hereby advised that … no permit for demolition, substantial alteration or removal shall be issued; and the site, building or structure regardless of whether a permit exists, shall not be demolished, substantially altered or removed ...”

Note that the owner/developer worked on the building approximately 6 days/week since closing escrow, despite being told to stop as far back as 2/27/25. Several inspectors from various departments were called out to inspect but there was no enforcement, despite the applicants making CHC, OHR and Building and Safety aware of ongoing work as early as 2/26/25. (Why were permits issued and construction continued from Jan-April 2025?).

During the submission process, the edits required were mostly perfunctory, but after the first submittal OHR staff asked for the removal of discussion about the “Ownership and Tenant History,” and the section on “Integrity.” OHR decided they were not necessary and didn’t belong. We felt strongly otherwise. These sections provided a good discussion of the early residential history and the kinds of people who populated 924-928 Marco Place Court. Among the many single-family dwellings, the Court was created to house the working class who contributed to the growth of Venice in Abbot Kinney’s vision. The Commission then mentioned the lack of these sections in their hearing discussions. We worked very hard and did considerable research on these sections. We felt they were a part of our application. Yet we took them out per OHR’s wishes.

Applicants/neighbors reported all the violations which prompted visits from a string of inspectors from the various relevant departments, none of whom acted to stop Mr. Donovan’s illegal work. The new owner/developer did not respect the historic property and the regulations that were required.

A representative party of Commissioners visited Marco Place Court on 4/8/25 for the required site visit. Mr. Donovan worked hard to make the property look in disarray in order to hide its remaining historic features and appeal. The Commissioners could not see the charming property as it was when bought by Mr. Donovan only months before and the quality of life that a century of residents enjoyed (images from before the sale were included in the application). For example, the owner/developer cut down old growth trees (he claimed he didn’t like the view of them from his own home at 935 Marco Place!) He followed that with insensitive work on the building itself (windows, staircase, roofs, etc.) At one point, he inexplicably completely covered the windows of one of the occupied units with plywood for several weeks, providing the front door of the unit as the only source of egress, as well as limiting light and air, for the tenant. Mr Donovan removed the illegal plywood window coverings the morning of the site visit.

What Mr. Donovan did not reveal when he made his comments at both hearings were lies of omission. The Commission several times in its summations spoke about both sides wanting the same thing. That was not accurate. Mr. Donovan sees his purchase as a money maker and did not want the HCM. Days after your determination of "declined" of 5/15/25, Mr. Donovan served the tenants an order to vacate their homes, issuing a petition to invoke the Ellis Act. After vacating the units, his intent is to rent them out as luxury, market rate rentals. He didn't disclose that to CHC and OHR, but he told the tenants and neighbors his intention when he first took possession of the property.

We are not asking to revisit this case, but we want it on record that we feel there were irregularities in this process and now an historic property and its surrounding neighborhood -- and most importantly its tenants -- are paying the price.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Sue Kaplan

Cc:
Councilmember Traci Park, CD-11
Mr. Craig Bullock, CD-11 Planning Director
Mr. Jeff Khau, CD-11 Planning Deputy
Mr. Sean Silva, CD-11 Field Deputy
Mr. Vincent Bertoni, Director of Planning
Ms. Juliet Oh, Senior City Planner
Ms. Mary Jack, Co-applicant

Timeline:
11/25/24: We submitted our completed application.
12/23/24: Initial submission deemed incomplete.
1/17/25: Application resubmitted.
1/22/25: Second submission deemed incomplete.
1/24/25: We submitted again for the third time.
2/24/25: The application was accepted as complete. A hearing date was set for 3/20/25. (Note that it took us 3 months from 11/25/24 initial submission until 2/24/25 to be deemed "complete". Also note that one month passed between the third submission on 1/24/25 and 2/24/25 notification of completeness.)
2/27/25: A Certified letter to applicants and new owner/developer (Mr. Jeffrey Donovan) notifying of 3/20/25 CHC hearing date. Importantly the notice states:
You are hereby advised that … no permit for demolition, substantial alteration or removal shall be issued; and the site, building or structure regardless of whether a permit exists, shall not be demolished, substantially altered or removed ...”
3/20/25: initial CHC hearing; property taken "under consideration" for further review for HCM status
4/8/25: CHC site visit
5/15/25: final hearing